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ISRAEL'S GREATEST SIN: IDOLATRY.

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The people of Israel had been taken by Jehovah to be a special people unto him; they had been rescued from the thralldom of Egypt in order that they might accomplish a work for Jehovah in the earth. They had been placed in a special relation to God, not simply that they might enjoy privileges beyond the other nations of the earth, but that they might be the agents of God to receive and disperse the truths that God would have men learn.

The significance of the conflict that was carried on between Israel and Egypt when the former would gain their freedom was stated to be in the purpose of God to show to Pharaoh that he who contended for the enslaved Hebrews was Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent Being. When the Israelites had reached almost the opposite extreme of their career, when they were brought in conflict with the mighty power of Babylon, and the nation seemed about to be lost by being sifted among the peoples around them, at the very time that the world-power seemed so sure of its victory over the kingdom of God on the earth; the prophet Ezekiel announces that the people once rescued from the grasp of Egypt will again be rescued from the power of their enemies, in order that these may know that the God of the Jews is Jehovah, the eternal, self-existent Being.

In the midst of all the idolatrous beliefs and practices of the many nations with which Israel came in contact there was to be held up, as a bright light in a dark and stormy night, the truth that there was but one true God and that he was Jehovah. To teach to the world this doctrine of Monotheism was the first and most important mission of the Israelites. If they should fail in this they would fail in a most vital particular. If the people chosen for this purpose should themselves turn from Jehovah, deny him, and accept

the sovereignty of the strange gods of the nations about them, they would not only be of no service to God in unfolding the truths that men should learn, but they would be a decided obstacle in the way of his purposes. That would be a most grievous sin.

Underlying very many of the laws that were given to the Israelites there may easily be seen, as a determining truth, the doctrine of God's holiness. In the camp of Israel there was to be nothing of an unclean character; for that which was unclean was a symbol of unholiness, and unholiness could in no wise be tolerated within the camp of Israel; for God was dwelling among them, and God was *holy*. And so the injunction is repeatedly made to the Israelites: "Be ye holy, for I am holy." Above the sacred Tabernacle was the fiery symbol of him who could not admit into his presence, nor allow to share in his companionship, any who were unholy or impure.

In the midst of all the debasing pollutions of the self-invented religions of the heathen nations with whom Israel came in contact there was to be a persistent protest against that which was unholy and corrupt. Associated with the thought of God there was ever to be the thought of a *holy* God. The heathen defended the unholiness of their thoughts, and the impurities of their lives, by the convenient belief that the gods were like themselves; that the gratification of their own sinful desires would indeed be a form of acceptable worship to their gods. But through Israel these were to be taught that Jehovah was a holy God; that they who had clean hands and pure hearts only could come into his presence. The cry of the seraphim, as they chanted in antiphonal chorus, making the posts of the temple doors to tremble with the sound, was to be the cry that Israel was to proclaim in the ears of the idolatrous nations of the earth: "Holy, holy, holy, is Jehovah of hosts." If now, Israel should fail to teach this truth, if they should themselves fall into the debasing, unholy practices of the nations around them, if they should, not simply fail to turn others from unholiness, but also in the very eyes of the heathen, connect with the worship of Jehovah the impurities of idolatry, they would not only fail

in their mission, but they would be a positive hindrance to the teaching of this most important doctrine of God's holiness. This would be a most grievous sin.

In contrast with the prevailing belief of the nations around Israel, that each separate people had its own god whose sovereignty extended only as far as the territory on which he was worshiped, was the doctrine taught to the Israelites: that Jehovah was Lord of all the earth; that not only did he rule the people he had taken for himself, but that the heathen also were responsible to him for their deeds. This truth was set forth with more or less clearness whenever Israel had to contend with the other nations for the supremacy, or for their independence. We find the name "Lord Jehovah" occurring with marked frequency in those prophets especially that prophesied at the time of Israel's greatest struggles with their enemies. They thus emphasized the fact that Jehovah was the universal and only Sovereign. If now in opposition to this teaching the Israelites should reject Jehovah as their God, and accept the god of some other nation as their Lord; they would not simply fail to impress this important truth upon the nations around them, but would most effectually teach that it was not so. Jehovah would be deposed from his rightful position in the estimation of man, and the name of God would be blasphemed among the Gentiles through them. It is very evident that this would be a grievous sin.

Closely connected with the doctrine that Jehovah was Lord over all men was the doctrine that all the powers of nature were in his control; that the rains were given and withheld at his pleasure; that the blessings of the field were from his hand; that what man enjoyed was the gift of the benevolence of Jehovah. This truth was especially impressed upon the Israelites when they were punished for their sins by the withholding of the early and the latter rain; or by the invasion of their land by the devouring locusts, God's great army; or by the intervention of their God on their behalf, when their enemies were routed by the storm, or overwhelmed by the sea, or destroyed by the deadly pestilence. If now Israel should turn away from Jehovah, and look to the idols

of the heathen for protection and support, seek from them the bounties that Jehovah only could give; they would not only fail to teach to others what they themselves had been taught, but their conduct would proclaim the teaching to be false. Preferring idols to Jehovah for such a purpose would be a grievous sin.

In view of the great mission to which Israel was called and the vital interests that depended upon their fidelity to their trust, we are not surprised to find that the laws against idolatry were fully given, and that their sanctions were most severe. Not only was the nation threatened with severe punishment if they should forsake Jehovah for other gods, but any individual who in any way should lead others to the worship of idols was to be put to death, his nearest relative even being warned against sparing him.

It is quite probable that the laws by which Israel was to be distinguished from other nations, were intended chiefly to prevent such a commingling with the heathen as would result in Israel's becoming idolatrous. They were to destroy the Canaanites utterly, in order that these might not be a snare to them in leading them into a recognition of any as God but Jehovah only. The law against inter-marriage with other nations was not based upon the fact that the women of the other nations would not in themselves be fit for Israelite wives, but arose from the necessity of preventing the adoption of the idolatry of the heathen along with the wives from the heathen. The sad fate of Solomon fully justified the law, and showed its expediency.

In tracing the history of the Israelites it is very evident that their downfall was due to their idolatry more than to any thing else. From the first they manifested a tendency to depart from Jehovah, and to follow the practices of the nations about them. The period of the Judges is chiefly characterized by Israel's idolatry. The rod of chastisement fell most heavily upon the nation when it had rejected Jehovah, and had despised the Holy One of Israel. The work in which the prophets were most often engaged was endeavoring to bring the people whom Jehovah had taken as his special treasure back to their allegiance to their God. The severest

condemnation of the prophets was that which was hurled against the apostasy of Israel; the greatest punishments that they predict are punishments for spiritual adultery. Israel was an unfaithful wife, and shame must cover her; grief, disappointment, destruction must follow upon her evil course.

It had been declared from the first that if Israel should forsake Jehovah for the idols of the nations about them they would be removed from the land which Jehovah would give to them; and because of their persistency in this very sin the threat was at last fulfilled; the Israelites were carried into captivity. The blow that then fell upon them was a severe one, but it was effective in restraining them from repeating the sin that caused it; the nation did not again depart from the worship of Jehovah. Idolatry was torn from the heart of the nation; Jehovah was allowed to retain his supremacy over his chosen people. Israel sinned in other ways, but they did not again fall into that greatest sin, idolatry.